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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5638
INFO RUEHAD/AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI PRIORITY 1477
RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 7462
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5662
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0964
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 5033
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 3767
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0464
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0450
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 8030
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 2253
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 2727
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000850

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ELA, EEB/ESC/TFS; NSC FOR ABRAMS/MCDERMOTT;
COMMERCE FOR BIS/CHRISTINO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/26/2018
TAGS: FAIR ECON ETRD PGOV PREL SA SY
SUBJECT: SYRIAN AIR DEDICATES LAST FOUR PLANES TO HAJJ
TRAVEL

REF: A. DAMASCUS 438
1B. DAMASCUS 661

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4(b,d)

Summary

11. (C) A Syrian Air ticketing agent told Embassy staff that the airline is currently operating just four of its fleet of 16 aircraft, due to its inability to obtain essential spare parts. From November 22 to December 9, Syrian Air is dedicating its four remaining operational Airbus A320s to flying Hajj pilgrims between Damascus and Jeddah. Despite the continuing deterioration of Syrian-Saudi political relations exacerbated by the September 27 car-bombing of a Syrian Military Intelligence office, some 30,000 to 35,000 Syrian pilgrims are expected to complete the Hajj this year.
End summary.

And Then There Were Four

12. (C) A Syrian Air ticketing agent (and 11-year employee) told Embassy staff that the airline is currently operating just four of its fleet of 16 aircraft, due to its inability to obtain essential spare parts. She commented that the national airline's payroll had not been reduced concomitantly as planes had been grounded, so Syrian Air pilots work only one or two days each month. To meet seasonal demand for transportation to the Hajj, she added, all four operational Airbus A320s will be dedicated to shuttling pilgrims between Damascus and Jeddah from November 23 to December 9, when regular -- albeit limited -- service will resume.

13. (C) The SARG News Agency (SANA) reported on November 20 that Syrian Air's last of eight Boeing aircraft had been grounded. (Note: We presume the SANA report refers to Boeing

747 (YK-AHB), whose 1000-hour flight extension was expected to expire in fall 2008. End note.) In September (ref B), Syrian Air Technical Director Mohiedin Issa told us that his top priority was overhauling four engines for Syrian Air's fleet of six Airbus A320s. At that time, Issa confirmed that one A320 was grounded while its engine was being overhauled in Germany. The ticketing agent's admission that only four aircraft are operational would indicate that another A320 was recently grounded.

Hajj Travel Demand High, Despite Politics

¶4. (C) Regarding expected Syrian participation in the Hajj, a local travel agent explained that the Saudi government offers some 30,000 to 35,000 "hajj visas" for Syrian pilgrims each year. The agent claimed that Syria receives a disproportionately high number of hajj visas compared with what most Muslim countries are offered -- 1,000 visas per one million population. (Note: According to that formula, Syria would only be entitled to 19,000 visas. Whether true or not, the perception of Saudi favoritism towards Syria regarding Hajj participation is widely shared among our Sunni contacts. End note.)

¶5. (C) The agent vehemently denied that strained SARG-Saudi political relations would have an adverse impact on this year's Hajj. He claimed that even though most Syrians blame the Saudis for fomenting Sunni extremism behind the September 27 Damascus car-bombing, Syrian Muslims would always view the opportunity to complete the Hajj as a privilege not to be missed. Shrugging, he said that Syrians traveling to Saudi Arabia "expect to be discriminated against because we are Syrian," but pilgrims rationalize poor treatment by Saudi authorities as a personal sacrifice that increases the journey's spiritual value.

¶6. (C) As evidence that the Hajj is "above politics," the travel agent related an anecdote involving the current Grand Mufti of Syria Ahmad Badr Hassoun. According to the agent, the Saudi government denied the Mufti a Hajj visa in 2001 or 2002 after Hassoun -- then the Mufti of Aleppo -- had made public remarks disparaging Wahhabism. In response, the Mufti allegedly threatened the Saudi Ambassador in Damascus that, if his visa was not approved, he would start a campaign calling for the holy cities of Mecca and Medina to be placed under international administration so that all Muslims could worship without political interference. Within a week, the agent claimed, the Mufti received his visa.

Comment

¶7. (C) It's worth noting that the regime continues to plant stories in local media attempting to reassure the public that the SARG is addressing Syrian Air's difficulties. While SANA's November 20 article revealed that the last Boeing 747 had been grounded, the report falsely claimed that Syrian Air was still operating eight aircraft (instead of four). Transportation Minister Yarub Badr then told SANA on November 25 that negotiations with Airbus officials to facilitate the purchase of new aircraft are continuing and revived the years-old rumor that Syrian Air may lease Russian aircraft. As stated in ref B, export licenses for overhauling Syrian Air's Airbus A320 engines may provide a useful lever if the European maintenance providers ever apply for them.

CONNELLY